Rules of Affinity (Part 4)

Clarifying the Purpose

A Little More Clarification on the Function of the Rules

In my so-called "Rules of Affinity" I am seeking to accomplish one main task. That task is to uncover the degree of affinity between any statement of a doctrine or part doctrine, and the biblical references which are brought in to support it or defend it. All of us know that Christians with different theological outlooks claim that *their* views are biblical. But in reality just saying "I believe such-and-such because it's biblical" does not mean that it actually *is* biblical. It may be. But, for example, if someone says, "Calvinism is biblical" and someone else says "Arminianism is biblical" it stands to reason that behind both statements is the *opinion* (either informed or uninformed) of the one making the claim. No one ought to assume that any statement is proven by assertion.

As I was reading my own Theology and thinking through the question of why I differed from this or that theologian, I concluded, naturally enough, that the main reason for my disagreements was because I believed my position was more in line with the Bible. That didn't mean it was, but that was why I demurred. The words "God has spoken" seem to me to be the most momentous three words in the English language. I therefore wanted to know if what I believed and taught actually closely reflected what "God has spoken," and how compatible were my theological propositions with the texts I appealed to. I did this by assuming a suspicious attitude towards my Theology. Hence, the negative application of the method was uppermost in my mind when it was first roughly devised. The negative use also became apparent when I began asking myself why I couldn't accept certain formulations of doctrine by some of the great men I read. Almost immediately it dawned on me that the chiefest doctrines of the Christian Faith: the doctrines all Christians would say must be believed at a minimum to be a Christian, involved very straightforward appeals to biblical passages (hence, the *Positive Application* of the rules).

I have said elsewhere:

We can say things without having sufficient warrant from the texts we teach from (we can all do this!). <u>I would not want to draw a line, to step over which would bring one into the fields of speculation</u>, but there ought to be some self-awareness here. It ought not to be as common as it is to find believers insisting on theological tenets which, upon comparison with the texts they cite, attach themselves obliquely to those texts. This is where we can all help each other; where iron sharpens iron. Disagreements will remain, but mutual understanding will be promoted.

Let me say some words about the part of the quotation I have highlighted. Perhaps I should have said something like, "I would not wish to circumscribe other peoples' formulations with my own, but we need to be able to find a means of locating and identifying speculation in its various degrees and manifestations." So I went on to say,

we ought to have some sort of grid whereby we can categorize Direct from Indirect usage of the statements of Scripture, and <u>get an idea of the degree of indirectness</u> of our statements.

This is what I think the Rules of Affinity help us to do. But there are some things they cannot do.

What the Rules Don't Do

1. ***First, the rules do not replace nor attempt to usurp grammatical-historical exegesis:***

I say this with an awareness of the fact that the various systems of theology mean different things by this term nowadays. It used to be that everyone agreed what the term "grammatico-historical hermeneutics" (hereafter G-H) meant. It meant seeking as much as possible to put oneself into the situation of the writer while paying special attention to his words in their lexical meanings and the larger context in which they are used. Thus, Milton Terry wrote:

In the systematic presentation, therefore, of any scriptural doctrine, we are always to make a discriminating use of sound hermeneutical principles. We must not study them in the light of modern systems of divinity, but should aim rather to place ourselves in the position of the sacred writers, and study to obtain the impression their words would naturally have made upon the minds of the first hearers…Still less should we allow ourselves to be influenced by any presumptions of what the Scriptures ought to teach… – Quoted in Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, 55.

To add a later comment, Robert Thomas himself, when writing about the gospels, observes:

Grammatical-historical hermeneutics do not assume an esoteric message requiring special keys to unlock meaning. Rather, they follow the usual laws of language that advocate that the Gospels mean what they say, without any special coding – such as midrashic or haggadic style or any other type of literary signals – necessary to unlock meaning. – Ibid. 291

As Thomas demonstrates in his book, today G-H hermeneutics is often taken to include application or the analogy of faith, or theology, or even ones understanding of the whole canon. But listen to another voice:

In the last analysis, our theology finds its solid foundation only in the grammatical sense of Scripture. Theological knowledge will be faulty in proportion to its deviation from the plain meaning of the Bible. – Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 74.

It has been objected that ones hermeneutical assumptions stand apart from the Rules of Affinity, therefore allowing them to be skewed by those presuppositions. In reply I may say that the "Rules" will only display the amount of rationalizing that went into the hermeneutics, and the outcome of their application would not be affected as it related to text and proposition, which is what the "Rules" measure. I appreciate that Berkhof, for example, held many interpretations which would succumb to the lower categories of the Rules of Affinity, but that is not because of

what he stated above. Rather, it is because of his firm belief in the theological interpretation of Scripture (as in chapter 7 of his manual). <u>The Rules of Affinity do not judge the propriety of a theological interpretation</u>. They do, however, uncover it!

2. *The rules do not judge the "rightness" of any proposition:*

Any viewpoint which is self-limiting in its openness to methods of hermeneutics other than the G-H approach defined above cannot venture beyond the **C3** formulation on the Grid. "Classic" Dispensationalism is the obvious example of this. But what about those views which avail themselves more readily of theological assumptions or ANE parallels and such? Quite often these viewpoints require more detailed explanation and deduction than can be derived simply from the text of Scripture under consideration. One thinks of the "Framework" and "Analogical" interpretations of Genesis 1, or the "Universe as Temple" teaching now in vogue. Older doctrines like particular redemption or infant baptism or "the Christian Sabbath" come to mind.

Under the Rules of Affinity these sorts of ideas do not find support from **C1, C2** or **C3** categories on the Grid. Their "affinity" with the texts used to support them is considerably weaker than, say, the affinity between the proposition, "Christ is our penal substitute" and the wording of 1 Peter 3:18:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit

Although this is so, many will still wish to assert that these **C4** and **C5** doctrines are biblical. Whether that be so or not, <u>all the Rules presume to measure is the "distance" between text and proposition</u>; a distance which will need to be made up by inference. For this reason it is best to restrict the "Rules" to individual doctrines rather than systems – although there will be a transfer of influence from the lesser to the greater. But it needs to be said that claiming "I believe this because it's biblical" when that claim cannot be supported via **C1-C3** propositions becomes a less compelling statement to many. The rules make us more aware of what we are doing.

3. *The rules do not adjudicate on matters of "genre"*

While everyone admits that there are different genres in Scripture, some theologies have made themselves heavily reliant on a certain understanding of particular genres. Perhaps the most prominent one is "Apocalyptic," which is leaned upon by some eschatological outlooks even though no scholar's definition of the genre has received full approval. What is meant by "Apocalyptic", and how to identify if and where it is in use is a matter of no little contention in biblical scholarship. Likewise, the use and abuse of typology and its specifics are constantly debated back and forth.

That a genre is employed can be admitted into the Rules. But when ones understanding of a genre begins to separate the actual words of a Bible passage from any proposed theological outcome the Rules will disclose the separation (viz. degree of affinity).

To pick an obvious example, consider two interpretative views of the following text:

And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel: 5 from the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand, from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand, 6 from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand, from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand, from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand, 7 from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand, from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand, from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand, 8 from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand, from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand, from the tribe of Benjamin, twelve thousand were sealed. 9 After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; (Rev. 7:4-9)

First a comment by a dispensational premillennialistist:

chapter 7 contains two incidents: the sealing of the 144,000 of the tribes of Israel; a great multitude of all nations and kindreds and people and tongues. – J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 127.

Now a comment by an amillennialist:

The difference between the 144,000 "Israelites" and the countless multiethnic multitude is not in the ethnic composition of the two groups but in their location. The sealed and numbered army of Israel shows the faithful church on earth, shielded from apostasy and from God's wrath by our union with the Lamb (bearing his name, sealed by his Spirit). – Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 134.

In the treatment of these verses by the two men Smith notices the lack of uniformity in the 29 lists of Israel's tribes in Scripture, and posits reasons for the exclusion of Dan and Ephraim in this list. He also does not venture from the text by calling Israel an army. In the second comment the tribes of Israel in the passage are identified as the church which is also the innumerable multitude John saw "after these things." Johnson spends pages explaining why the 144,000 is a symbolic number of "the tribes of Israel" who are in turn symbolic of the Church he sees in verse 9f. He needs to bring in a lot other passages and inferences to arrive at his destination, whereas Smith takes the text as it stands and tries to find illustrations of it elsewhere.

The Rules do not say that either approach is right or wrong. But they do show that the second interpretation is more inferential than the first. Johnson needs to explain why the tribes do not represent Israel but do represent the Church, and why the number 144,000 is symbolic of a multitude which cannot be numbered. Every need for explanation introduces another inference which makes the wording of the text less direct in relation to the meaning which is being proposed. This pushes out the "distance" between text and interpretation.